

## How Did I Get Here? Soliloquies of youth

*There are times when the right to remain silent and the need to say something exist in the same moment. I would suppose a choice is made at such a time as to whether guilt is a matter of fact or a matter of conscience. A youthful mind forged in a crucible of fear might argue, 'Yeah I did it, but that don't make me guilty. My world has a different measure.'*

In January 2020 poet Ben Brown took a box of biros, an A4 ream of paper and a question to 28 YPs—young people—living in Te Puna Wai o Tūhinapō, the Oranga Tamariki youth justice residence next door to Rolleston Prison, south-west of Christchurch.

He asked them, 'How did you get here?'

Over four days of kōrero and collaboration, tautoko and awhi, the young men aged 13–18 wrote their answers as poems, which have been collected in a book, with illustrations by two of the participants.

## About the author

**Ben Brown** (Waikato–Tainui) is a poet, performer, fiction and non-fiction writer, and children's author. He's published numerous books and his work has appeared in anthologies and other publications. He is a father of two, which he considers his best work to date. Born in Motueka, he lives in Lyttelton by the sea, which suits him fine.



# Subject relevance

English, creative writing, social studies, civic studies. (Years 8–13)

## Where is here?

*How Did I Get Here?* comes from a place of incarceration, specifically, the Te Puna Wai o Tūhinapō Youth Justice facility at Rolleston, South Island, New Zealand. It is presented as a collection of poetry. The book is the result of a four-day writing workshop in January 2020 conducted by the editor, Ben Brown. The writers are called YPs in the youth justice system, which stands for ‘Young Person’ or ‘Young People’. In meetings and formal discussions regarding their welfare, management and conduct, they are often referred to as ‘rangatahi’ or ‘youth’.

Youth Justice residence facilities in Aotearoa New Zealand are administered by Oranga Tamariki. There are four in the country, three in the North Island and one in the South Island. Prisons are the domain of the Department of Corrections. The YPs at Te Puna Wai during the writing workshop that produced this book were there for the full range of offences, from murder to aggravated robbery and assault to burglary and petty theft. They were asked to respond to a simple question: ‘How the f\*\*\* did I get here?’

## Why a soliloquy?

You may not have heard the word ‘soliloquy’ before, or if you have, you may not know what it means. I wouldn’t worry too much about that. If you haven’t and you don’t and you decide to keep on reading, then the situation will resolve itself.

A soliloquy, technically speaking, is a special kind of utterance.

An utterance is when you say or express something aloud. Speaking, sighing, grunting, laughing, scoffing, these are types of utterance. A soliloquy is spoken, but it might have a laugh or a sigh or some other vocal expression in it somewhere. The important thing to know about a soliloquy is that it is spoken by one person alone, as if they are talking to themselves, which of course, they are. The clue is in the word soliloquy itself, evolved from two Latin words; *solus* (alone) and *loqui* (to speak).

It’s not just talking for the sake of it either. There is both purpose and artistry in a soliloquy. It is a deliberate and considered kind of utterance. It is also a gentle deception, a speech designed to imply that it is not being spoken.

‘Eh?’ I hear you say. ‘How does that work?’

Well, it works best when the speaker is a character, say in a play or a film perhaps. So you see straight away that in the first instance, a soliloquy is written to be spoken and also that the person who speaks it will often be an actor or performer, someone who knows how best to present the



words. So there will be artistry in the delivery. But there's a little more to it than that. A soliloquy, generally speaking, is a moment of self reflection at some pivotal moment of drama, the character thinking aloud about his or her place in the bigger picture revealing around them.

We can see then that a soliloquy exists beyond the moment of utterance, the moment of speech. It is there in the writing of it, in the careful crafting of words and the implied silences between them. Here we find artistry as well, in the shape and structure of words on the page, in the poetry or the prose.

'To be, or not to be? That is the question —' begins probably the most famous of all soliloquies, in English anyway. If you know your Shakespeare you'll recognise *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 1). If not, no matter, we have an almost identical phrase that comes to us from a source much closer to home.

'Ka mate! Ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora! ...'

'To die! To die! To live! To live! ...'

A soliloquy of sorts, a man weighing the same choices as Hamlet, ultimately choosing life, whether by chance or design, hiding in a kūmara pit, muttering under his breath, awaiting the sun to shine once again: '... nāna nei i tiki mai whakawhiti te ra!'

Sometimes 'Ka mate' is a karakia rather than a haka, chanted in the tramping of a house after the tangihanga of the person who lived there. In this context it is an acknowledgement of death, a soliloquy of mortality and the denouement of existence where the inescapable choice is made for you, sending the spirit on its way.

But it's not all doom and gloom. Reflecting upon the nature of our existence, on the choices we make and the roads we travel, these are natural considerations. Where did I come from? Where am I going? What are my dreams? What is my meaning? Rappers ask these questions all the time. Tupac Shakur (2Pac) in *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* talks about overcoming the odds and beauty arising from harshness. He's talking about hope fulfilled and life's possibilities. These too are appropriate themes for a soliloquy.

In summary then, the landscape explored in soliloquy is life and death and all between, drawn to moments of significance that we as players in our own unfolding dramas have cause to consider from time to time. A soliloquy is a personal reflection, a search of the soul, an investigation of wairua. It is a moment in time when we ask ourselves, 'How did I get here? Where am I going? What does it mean?'

These are questions everyone asks.



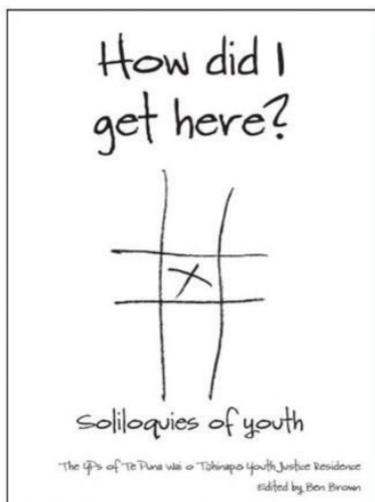
# Some things to think about and write about

Feel free to discuss these points and to write something in reply to any of the questions. Don't worry about how the writing looks on the page. Spelling and grammar rules don't matter at this point. Just get the words down. Write like you are writing a letter or a story or a song or a rap, and break the lines up, if that feels right. Give your work a title and add your name.

- Think about the title of the book: *How did I get here?* Why do you think the editor asks this question? Do you think it was a good question to ask?
- Can you think of a moment or time in your life when you have asked the question yourself? If you have asked this question before, could you answer it at the time? Can you answer it now? If you can, what would you say and how would you say it?
- Do you think the 'here' of the title question is always a physical place, like a youth justice facility? Could it be something else? If it was something else, what might it be? In any of the works in the book can you identify a 'here' that might be something or somewhere other than a physical place? Can a 'place' be in your head? Can 'here' be an emotional state, for example?
- The book contains some simple illustrations also drawn by two of the YPs. Thinking about the cover illustration, how do you think it is relevant to the book? What do you think the illustration symbolises? Why do you think it was chosen for the cover? Could one of the other illustrations have been a cover? What do you make of the other illustrations?
- The book has a dust jacket that is white with black print. The body of the book itself has black pages with white print. Do you think this is significant to the book? Does it add in some way to what the book is about? If you think so, how does it do this?
- Thinking about a soliloquy as a work of self-reflection, what do you think the phrase 'self-reflection' means? Do you think speaking a soliloquy gives it more power than just writing it? Would you be prepared to read out any of your writing?
- The idea of a choice to be made at some pivotal moment in life is presented as a theme for exploration. Can you identify works in the book that demonstrate this moment. If you can, what were the choices? What was the outcome of those choices?
- Do you recognise moments in your own life where you've been faced with crucial choices? How did you learn to judge which choice to make? How does anyone learn to make these kinds of judgments? Is someone always responsible for the choice or choices they make?
- Some of the writers have focused on a singular event or moment in their life that had a significant impact on them. Can you identify such an event? How have you handled or do you think you might handle a similar moment in your own life?
- Think about the writers and why they were incarcerated. Do you think it is significant that a youth justice residence is administered differently to a prison? Should it be different? If so, why? If not, why not?
- If the YPs are the writers, what do you think the editor's job was in the creation of this book? Why do you think the editor chose a subtitle? Do you think it is necessary?



- In the following book review (*North & South*, February 2021) when Paul Little, the reviewer, states that ‘The third line is the critical one’, to what is he referring specifically and why is it so critical? Can you find the same theme or idea expressed in other work in the book? Discuss with examples.



## HOW DID I GET HERE? SOLILOQUIES OF YOUTH

**The YPs of Te Puna Wai o  
Tūhinapō Youth Justice  
Residence edited by Ben Brown  
The Cuba Press — \$25**

Teenagers writing poetry? What could possibly go wrong? Nothing this time, fortunately. Under the guidance of writer, performer and — on the evidence here — inspired youth worker Ben Brown, 28 teenagers incarcerated in the eponymous centre were given pens, paper and the question of the title. Their various answers are reproduced here.

The book is done in white print on black paper. Not only does this create a sombre and imposing impression, it’s also an effective metaphor for the reverses these young men have experienced.

The writers express themselves with a rough and powerful eloquence. That spelling and grammar are clearly not strengths only emphasises the connection between literacy and the cycles of poverty and the chance that a young person — particularly a male,

and even more particularly a Māori male — will end up in prison.

The collection is not, as it could have been, a series of naïve and emotional exclamations or howls of pain. The first poem yokes together Genesis, Psalms and Justin Bieber:

Please publish these words  
in a book so  
hopefully  
Justin Bieber can see it.

The third line is the critical one. These teenagers express insights into parts of life that most people will never face. Take the speaker in “Not Guilty”, addressing the judge:

And anyway my Sins  
are worth more  
than your  
salary

There is not just bravado in these lines, there’s also bravery. This book is a valuable opportunity to gain some understanding of the reality behind talkback diatribes and political platitudes about youth, race and crime.

